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AUTHOR Cameron, Bonnie
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ABSTRACT

A multi-disciplinary approach to the teaching of a unit on World War II is described. With the textbook serving as a resource, research books, films, literature books, and resource persons are used to help bring life to history. The unit emphasizes the following: (1) the four language processes of listening, reading, speaking, and writing; (2) thinking skills involving application, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation; (3) activities that provide vicarious experiences; and (4) decision making opportunitites to provide for diverse expectations, backgrounds, and interest levels. The description includes the activities carried out in the classroom, the use of resource materials and persons, and the changes in student perceptions. (KWL)

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by Bonnie Cameron

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You Are There: Reading, Feeling, Thinking History

By Bonnie Cameron
Viking Elementary School
Grand Forks, ND

Each fall I ask my sixth grade students at Viking Elementary School in Grand Forks, North Dakota, to rank the academic subjects from best to worst. The majority of the students rank social studies as the least-liked subject. Students tell me social studies is dull and "who cares about the past?" Since history is an expanding adventure for me it spells challenge to try to get my students more involved in this subject.

I believe social studies is ranked low because the textbook presents fact and data, not real life personal situations. And what is history, but real life people creating historical drama? How do you make social studies come alive? Students need to participate in the historical drama by assuming identities, problems, and conflicts of the period. They need to see, understand, and solve the needs, hopes, failures, and confusion of the times. Intellect and sensitivity must work together. As students empathize with the past, they find they cannot change that course of history, but they can alter, by their knowledge, involvement, and intervention, the trends of society today. When it becomes such a first hand and immediate goal to accomplish, history is not perceived as meaningless.

I use a multi-disciplinary approach to my unit. Textbooks are resources, not the entire curriculum. I attempt to create a curriculum that is integrated with the textbook. Other resources are research books, films, literature books, and resource persons. Throughout each unit I also try to keep a balance among the four language processes--listening, reading, speaking, and writing. In addition, every effort is made to extend the thinking skills--application, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation. In all my units, in all my activities, stress is placed on vicarious first hand experience. Students are also always asked to apply historical principles to current events. Finally, students are consistently asked to make choices which provide for diverse expectations, backgrounds, and interest levels.

I would like to illustrate these concepts by describing a unit based on the second World War. The very first thing I do is to have students answer in writing the following questions: What is war? What is peace? This activity, a kind of pre-test, is very important because it causes students to begin thinking about their personal beliefs about war and peace. The unit becomes a way for them to further explore the beliefs that they hold.

Another early activity involves a group exploration of conflict and resolution. Students are placed in groups of seven to nine. All students have a country name pinned to them as their identity. Students clasp the hands of two other people across the way. Then students have the job of untangling themselves without ever breaking the original handclasp. Within their group the goal is to make a perfect circle. I try to keep the groups large so that

it is very difficult to work out. This is followed by a discussion of what was the problem, what happened, what worked, what was the solution, and how is this conflict like war.

Students in my class do a great deal of reading and writing. Literature, in particular, is very important because it provides students with information about characters and historical events while simultaneously providing them with a feeling of "being there." A wide variety of books are placed in the room for students to read, grouped by me according to upcoming topics of discussion. The books used vary in reading difficulty so that students at all reading levels can participate. Some of the current literature does include language that might be offensive to selected families. I identify the books that are most graphic and then give students a choice of what they wish to read. In this way, problems do not arise. Examples of books used in the unit are discussed below.

When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit (Kerr) is a historical novel that relates the story of Anna and her family's escape from Germany in 1933. The Jewish journalist father and his family embark on an adventure that goes on for years in several different countries. This book is shared with the entire class. During the reading of this book, students keep a log of the special skills needed by refugees. This log is used throughout the unit as a basis for comparison to coping skills of other individuals met in subsequent readings. At the conclusion of the unit, students use the log to compare the skills refugees developed then to those needed by the refugees of today.

Two books that tell a similar story but which are at very different reading levels are The Diary of Anne Frank (Frank) and The Upstairs Room (Reiss). Students are asked to read one of these two books. Both stories are biographies of Jewish families that are secreted into hiding. The similarities in the stories make for interesting comparative discussions. Development of character traits of people who sheltered Jews, control methods used by Hitler, character changes in those being imprisoned, and the changing views toward Jews are issues confronted in both of these books. Before the books conclude we speculate and write about what would be our first wish if we were granted freedom after a long imprisonment of this sort.

Students are also asked to predict what life would have been like for those Germans serving with Hitler. While students are reading the two books mentioned above, I am reading aloud the book, Mischling, Second Degree, My Childhood in Nazi Germany (Koehn). This book is the story of a German girl who served in Hitler's Nazi Youth Corps. Her grandmother was a Jew but Ilse was never identified as a Jew. What would seem possibly like an ideal situation awakes students to the anger, ugliness, and evil seen and experienced by Germans. Students compare and contrast living conditions, attitudes, political feelings, and sacrifices made by both sides.

Rose Blanche (Innocenti) is a beautiful picture book that illustrates how a child experiences war without really understanding it and allows the reader to feel the pain of war. Although I share this book with the group orally, I leave it on the reading table and find students rereading it many times.

Students are also provided with books set in the Japanese theatre.

I believe that one of my responsibilities is to help students make sense out of what they know. By the time we get to this part of the unit, students have acquired a large data base. We make every attempt to share issues that matter to them. The logs, charting, and comparing and contrasting have helped them to focus on issues. I attempt to structure opportunities to explore the implications of their reading and learning together. Thus, following the reading of these books, we compare and contrast the conditions of the Japanese theatre to conditions of the European theatre. Survival was an issue for the European theatre just as it was for the Japanese. Discussion centers on how it would feel to be a survivor. What feelings might you have to be the only survivor of your family? What emotions/injuries might a survivor have? What would you try to say to a survivor to help ease his/her pain? Is there anything one can do or say to really help a survivor? Why/why not? What might we want the world to learn from our experience as a survivor? How do these experiences compare to survivors today, especially those survivors of hunger and terrorism?

Finally, we look at what was happening in the United States during the second World War. Cobblestone (December 1985) gives us a wonderful background. We use the entire issue. (Multiple copies of an issue of this magazine can be purchased from the publisher.) To learn more about how Americans felt, students also interview a person who was involved in World War II. I find that many of my students have grandparents who were involved in the war. One grandfather who spoke this past year had acquired a large Nazi flag as his regiment chased the fleeing Germans. He brought this flag into the classroom. As it was hung across the front of the classroom, a cold chill came across the class. Personally, I felt an element of fear pervade my body. It is important for students to prepare their questions in advance and discuss the fact that possibly the person still has some memories he/she does not feel able to share.

Writing also plays an important role in helping students explore these issues. Students keep a journal during the entire unit. They write in it, pretending they are participants living during that period of time. Students must develop an identity by referring to some of the following elements:

1) *Religion - Jewish, Christian, Atheist*

2) *Age - child, adult*

3) *Place of Residence*

4) *Role - military, civilian, political leader*

5) *Nationality - German, Swiss, Japanese, American, etc. (they must choose a fictitious name)*

The journal must be accurate in historical events of the time, but fictional in what role their character plays. I put a date on the board daily and that entry date is used by all the students. The first entry date in the journal is January 1, 1933: Hitler has just been elected dictator of Germany. We discuss Germany's economic and political state. Writing begins. Obviously the journals are radically different depending on the choices made as the character is created. Point of view becomes an issue and a discussion point as the unit progresses. Students occasionally have difficulty staying consistent with their created character and we discuss this in editing conferences. Through observing, talking, and

reading students' writing, I find out a great deal about their comprehension of the unit. The journal thus becomes an ongoing evaluative vehicle.

Students read about, research, and write about many aspects of World War II. They write biographical sketches of Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, Churchill, or Hirohito. Reports are given and charts are kept of contrasting leadership patterns. Students are also asked to assume the identity of one of these men and write a one minute persuasive political speech. Oral reports dealing with fascism and democracy are also given. Again, contrasts between fascism and democracy are established via charting. Students end up writing summaries which conclude with a personal statement about which government they would choose for themselves and why.

Throughout the unit students are involved in numerous other kinds of activities. These include:

- *Finding the official beginning and ending dates of World War II and deciding how many years the United States was involved in this conflict.*

- *Keeping a record of the date each country they were reading about entered the war.*

- *Investigating and listing the number of airstrikes and casualties involved in those airstrikes and constructing a chart or graph that shows this information.*

- *Naming the six major theatres of war (areas where the war took place).*

- *Naming the branches of the armed forces involved in World War II and tallying their total casualty count.*

- *Comparing the casualty count of World War II to either World War I or the Civil War.*

- *Researching the discovery of penicillin and its effect on soldiers in World War II.*

- *Preparing a play that gives the story behind the development of the atomic bomb.*

- *Making a report on the information they find about the invention and use of nylon.*

- *Investigating the use of DDT and its role in fighting disease during the war.*

- *Choosing one of the many major battles fought during the war years and creating a time line that explains the main events that occurred.*

- *Researching and possibly making some of the foods of the different ethnic groups, especially the Jewish people.*

- *Making a map showing the allies and axis powers.*

Students still learn dates, but they are taught in a way which makes them interesting to learn. Dates are placed on footprints and, as we proceed through the unit, I hang the footprints up on the wall. This helps students envision what is happening and understand the consecutive nature of the events. The dates used on this time line are the ones students are coming into contact with in their reading and researching. I don't include every date of the war.

By the end of the unit, I notice many important changes in the students. The events and the people of World War II are now quite real to the students. Although initially they found the power of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito alluring, by the end of the unit they look more at the characters of the leaders and they no longer seem attracted to the Axis powers. In their first essay on war and peace, students believed that war was filled with brave, courageous people fighting for good and might. They typically have the idea that "Superman always wins!" After concluding the unit, students see war as far less glamorous. All their discussions and readings influence their perceptions of war as hate and the building of walls between people, races, and groups. By the end of the unit, they see peace as being open, receptive, and accepting of people, races, and groups. In fact, one student last year told me that everyone in the world needed to spend more time studying peace.

This unit helps students experience "history." They develop new understandings as they explore the "war to end all wars." Hopefully, they will continue to raise the same kinds of questions we raise in the unit and, more importantly, continue to seek answers which allow for the harmonious coexistence of people.

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Bonnie Cameron lives in Grand Forks and is a sixth grade teacher at Viking Elementary School.

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